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# Vietnam Lesson: The Evil Is

**O**N THE 20TH anniversary of the fall of Saigon, on the occasion of Robert McNamara's mea culpa memoirs, Americans are once again debating the lessons of Vietnam. One quick conclusion: It is obscene for McNamara, now at the end of a long and prosperous career, to write a best-selling book in which he admits that all along he knew the war was a mistake. McNamara has had decades to reflect upon the inadequacy of his technocratic body-count analysis — decades of life and love that he helped deny to 58,000 Americans.



James P. Pinkerton

The follies of old generals are usually borne by young soldiers. In "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the poet Alfred Tennyson paid tribute to brave British cavalymen who fought in the Crimea; into the valley of death rode that gallant 600, because, as Tennyson wrote, "Someone had blundered."

But, historical memory must include triumph as well as tragedy.

This year, we remember the 50th anniversary of America's victory over fascism; 1945 also marks the beginning of the far longer twilight struggle against communism. The larger lesson of the Cold War is this: Communism was evil, and we were right to oppose it; we should learn from our mistakes, but we should also take note of our successes.

For example, bipartisan leadership across four decades kept West Berlin free. In 1948, Harry Truman ordered the airlift that saved its people from starvation during the Soviet embargo. In 1961, John Kennedy traveled to the divided city and proclaimed that he, too, was a Berliner. In 1987, Ronald Reagan stood in the shadow of the Wall and told Mikhail Gorbachev to tear it down.

Yet, even now, America can help defeat a new evil: forgetfulness. Both doves and hawks ought to agree that the full history of the Cold War era needs to be preserved. The Vietnam Memorial is a vivid reminder of the cost of containment; so is the Korean Memorial, to be opened this July.

Today, another touchstone of somber recollection is in the planning stages: a shrine to those killed by Communist totalitarians. In 1993, President Bill Clinton, with a nudge from congressional Republicans, authorized the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation to raise private money to construct a remembrance on the Washington Mall to the deaths of as many as

100 million people. Finally, those killed in faraway places — Siberia's Kolyma, Belarus' Katyn Forest, Tibet and Cambodia — will find a home for their memory.

As with the Holocaust Memorial, some Americans will question why the United States should recognize tragedy in other lands. Yet, since 1630, when John Winthrop declared that the Massachusetts Bay Colony should "be as a city upon a hill," Americans have seen it as their duty to lift the lamp of liberty into the darkness of repression and intolerance.

The Mall is already graced by memorials to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, three presidents who spoke universal truths about human freedom and dignity. Someday soon, people from around the world will be able to come to the national capital and

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## Forgetfulness

see not only what freedom can do, but also what the lack of freedom has done.

Twenty years after the last American died in Vietnam, we are left with a sobering realization. McNamara, as he has admitted too late, was

wrong: U.S. intervention was a mistake. Yet the North Vietnamese were not the agrarian reformers their U.S. admirers depicted them as, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia were even worse. Americans aren't used to such

murky situations.

So we should remember the wisdom of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who survived the gulag and went on to write history that will long outlive the last commissar: Totalitarian evil cannot exist by itself; it is always intertwined with the lie. If Americans dedicate themselves to remembering the truth, no tyrant will ever be secure.